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Durban's "African" climate summit – adaptation in Africa

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Bonn, 12 December 2011. Over the past two weeks Durban hosted the United Nations climate summit (the COP 17). Although the 194 negotiating parties did not reach a legally binding agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, they agreed to do so in 2015. We do not try to sound sarcastic here – the European Union pushed hard for this marginal outcome. More progress was made, however, on climate change adaptation, a subject of ever increasing importance. During this "African COP" in Durban, adaptation was high on the agenda. At the African pavilion, booths from all over the continent exhibited its vulnerability and highlighted the urgency for adaptation.

Before Durban

With ever growing CO₂ emissions, it is key to exploit existing adaptation opportunities to the maximum. All over the world, more and more researchers and NGOs work on adaptation. At earlier climate summits, it was agreed that adaptation must be addressed with the same priority as mitigation. Special committees and expert groups dealing with climate change adaptation have been created. And at the 2009 climate summit, developed countries have pledged to mobilize USD 30 billion for the period 2010-2012 and USD 100 bn per year from 2020 onwards to assist developing countries with climate change mitigation and adaptation. The last two climate summits were unable to deliver any practical agreements on reducing global greenhouse gas emissions. The above mentioned successes on adaptation saved them from failure.

But the current effort is nowhere near enough. A recent IPCC report reveals that climate change will lead to a higher number of extreme weather and climate events and that poor countries and people will suffer most from this development. Many of these people feel the impacts of climate change

already today. In 2010, the World Bank estimated the annual costs of adaptation in developing countries at USD 70 to 100 bn. But they assumed lower CO₂ emissions. And they only considered technical adaptive measures; dams and dikes and the like. But the social and institutional side of adaptation (e.g. capacity building, education) is equally important. In Rwanda and Kenya, for example, weather information provision is linked with agricultural information, improved farmers' access to drought tolerant seeds and water resources, and the promotion of livelihood diversification. Policy makers are also actively involved. Such inclusion of social and institutional components increases the investment costs and complexity of adaptation, but is key to making adaptation successful.

30 pieces of silver for our future

Despite its importance, the issue of adaptation is often raised carefully, not to distract negotiators from mitigation. If polluters like the United States and China do not reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, adaptation is of little use. When mitigation negotiations failed during the 2009 climate summit and instead developing countries were offered money for climate change adaptation, Tuvalu's lead negotiator Ian Fry replied: "it looks like we are being offered 30 pieces of silver to betray our people and our future". During COP17, however, some negotiators openly criticized the negotiations for being disproportionately weighted towards mitigation. Albeit, some progress was made on adaptation during the Durban summit.

Of particular importance is the progress on the Green Climate Fund which is supposed to channel much of the annual USD 100 bn climate finance. In Durban, a set of decisions has been made on the design and governance of the Green Climate

Fund. Unfortunately virtually no decisions were made on how the money will be raised. And to make the fund and climate finance successful, financial pledges need to increase from 2013 onwards. Switzerland, South Korea and Germany offered to host the fund; Germany also announced that it will set aside an additional 40 million Euro for 2012 and 2013.

But even if the financial resources will be raised, there are some problems. US lead negotiator Todd Stern provoked the COP by stating that developing countries are not ready for unconditional climate finance. In theory, this is unfair. Because according to the polluter pays principle, adaptation finance is damage repayment and polluters need to pay. Regardless of what the recipients will use the money for.

Yet, Stern had a point. Although insufficient, USD 100 bn per annum is an awful lot of money. And whilst national governments can be hit indirectly by climate change through lower tax incomes and reduced GDPs, people are hit directly. It must be ensured that adaptation money does not flow to national governments, but to the affected people.

A second important decision that was made in Durban deals with this issue. It was decided to enable the least developed countries to formulate National Adaptation Plans (NAP). These should describe countries' vulnerability to climate change, and strategies for long-term adaptation and for mainstreaming adaptation in national policies. The formulation should be country-driven, gender-sensitive, participatory and fully transparent,

and should be based on the best available science and knowledge. But again, no agreements are made on providing financial resources.

Don't wait for the negotiation outcomes – act now

With high needs and stagnating negotiations, developing countries themselves should take the initiative to prepare adaptation plans, and to build capacity to carry out adaptation activities. Because being ready increases the chance of receiving climate finance. African frontrunners like Mali and Ethiopia are already working on this and are also establishing their own climate change trust funds. An accountable and transparent fund can pool national and international finance for development and climate. It can work on long-term programmes rather than short-term projects, and is – if properly managed – a safe place for donors to invest their climate finance.

As with mitigation, international agreements on adaptation are made slowly. But developing countries do not need to wait and can step up their activities individually. And hopefully, their lessons learned and success stories can give an impulse to ongoing global climate negotiations.

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